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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000029

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA
ALSO FOR IO A/S HOOK, PDAS WARLICK
P FOR DRUSSELL AND RRANGASWAMY
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/GERMAIN/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR ABRAMS/RAMCHAND/YERGER/MCDERMOTT

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: PRESIDENT SARKOZY'S TRIP TO LEBANON
BOGGED DOWN BY GAZA

Classified By: Charge d'Affairs William Grant for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) According to a diplomat from the French Embassy, French President Nicolas Sarkozy's January 6 visit to Lebanon was bogged down by the events in Gaza. Little attention was given to Lebanese-specific issues, including Ghajar and Sheba'a Farms. Sarkozy met with government officials, but did not see anyone from the opposition since FM Fawzi Salloukh was in New York and Speaker Nabih Berri was observing the Shia holiday, Ashoura. Arriving from Damascus where he had met Syrian President Bashar Asad, Sarkozy stated publicly his confidence that a Syrian ambassador would be "quickly" appointed to Lebanon. Sarkozy repeated his offer to send election observers to Lebanon if formally requested by the GOL. No new military assistance offers were made during his trip nor during majority leader Saad Hariri's January 2 trip to Paris. End summary.

GAZA MAIN FOCUS

2. (C) In a January 7 meeting, a French diplomat briefed PolOff on French President Nicolas Sarkozy's January 6 visit to Lebanon, his second trip to Beirut in six months. She said that while Sarkozy was initially intending to visit only Beirut, he expanded his itinerary in response to the situation in Gaza to include Sharm el-Sheikh, Ramallah, Tel Aviv, and Damascus.

3. (C) The French diplomat explained that while the trip's purpose had been to discuss Lebanese-specific issues, including the exchange of ambassadors with Syria, all of the Lebanese interlocutors (including President Michel Sleiman, Defense Minister Elias Murr, Minister of State and acting Foreign Minister Nassib Lahoud, Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, and Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander Jean Kahwagi) were solely focused on Gaza. She said Siniora did not once mention Sheba'a Farms. (Note: Sarkozy did not meet with any member of the opposition. Two of the logical choices for such a meeting were unavailable: FM Fawzi Salloukh was in New York and Speaker Nabih Berri was observing Ashoura. End note.)

SYRIA TO "QUICKLY"

APPOINT AN AMBASSADOR

14. (C) According to the French diplomat, Sarkozy expressed his confidence that Syria would appoint an ambassador to Lebanon "quickly." She could not confirm whether Syrian President Bashar Asad had revealed its candidate to Sarkozy, but said she had heard of the reports identifying Colette Khoury as the candidate. She noted that the presence of the Syrian First Secretary in Beirut was "insufficient" to fulfill Syria's commitment to diplomatic relations with Lebanon, but that Sarkozy continued to advocate direct engagement with the Syrians.

15. (C) Siniora reportedly told Sarkozy that while he supported dialogue with Syria, he did not approve of what that dialogue had accomplished to date. The French diplomat relayed that Siniora called for more principled dialogue with Syria, with "better outcomes."

DISSATISFIED WITH NATIONAL
DIALOGUE PROCEEDINGS

16. (SBU) In his press conference from Baabda, Sarkozy noted that progress has been made in Lebanon since the Doha agreement, but lamented that the National Dialogue had yet to accomplish anything substantive. He asserted that the Lebanese Armed Forces is the sole legitimate entity to possess arms, and reiterated France's continued military support to the LAF.

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17. (SBU) During his trip, Sarkozy visited the French UNIFIL troops in southern Lebanon to deliver the traditional New Year's speech to the French troops, usually done from France.

NO NEW MILITARY DEALS,
WILLING TO SEND ELECTION
OBSERVERS

18. (C) Regarding majority leader Saad Hariri's January 2 trip to Paris, the French diplomat remarked that Saad's public statements about France sending election observers and military assistance were "strangely worded." She explained that Sarkozy repeated his offer to send election observers if requested by the Lebanese government, but had not yet received a formal request. She added that there are no new agreements on military assistance, and that France is still working on carrying out its previous assistance offers to the LAF.

GRANT